

Pakistan—Conflicted Ally in the War on Terror

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Arguably the greatest reverse suffered by the United States in its war on terror has been the rejuvenation of al-Qaeda and the Taliban—a revival the intelligence community believes is owed to their ability to secure a sanctuary in Pakistan. Accordingly, many Americans blame the regime of Pervez Musharraf for not delivering on its commitment to root out terrorist operatives from its territory despite receiving massive U.S. aid for that purpose.

The reality, however, is more complex. Although Pakistani counterterrorism effectiveness has fallen short of what Americans expect, Islamabad's failures in this regard are not simply due to a lack of motivation. Instead, the convulsive political deterioration in the North West Frontier Province in Pakistan, Islamabad's military ineptitude in counterterrorism operations, and the political failures of the Karzai government in Afghanistan have all exacerbated the problem. The war against al-Qaeda and the Taliban will thus be a long one requiring considerable patience on the part of the United States.

Understanding Pakistan's Approach to the War on Terror

Fearful that a break with the United States would imperil Pakistan's strategic interests, General Pervez Musharraf cast his lot with

the U.S. war on terror only reluctantly. He severed Pakistani ties with the Taliban—a force Islamabad had nurtured, trained, and equipped for almost a decade in its effort to secure control over Afghanistan—and stood aside while the U.S.-led coalition assisted the Northern Alliance to rout Pakistan's own Pashtun clients and their al-Qaeda accomplices and seize power in Kabul. The al-Qaeda and Taliban cadres thereafter moved across the highly porous Afghanistan-Pakistan border into the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), where they took advantage of the utterly hostile topography, the old tribal tradition of extending hospitality to strangers, and the absence of a strong Pakistani state presence.

In response to U.S. pressure, Musharraf adopted a two-sided, and sometimes two-faced, counterterrorism strategy. The Pakistani regime systematically suppressed domestic terrorist groups like the Sunni Lashkar-e-Jhangvi and the Shi'i Tehrik-e-Jafria that had engaged in bloody internal sectarian violence and subverted critical state objectives. By contrast, the regime largely ignored the terrorist outfits operating against India in Kashmir that were supported by the Pakistan Army and the Inter-Services Intelligence Directorate (ISID). Fearful of Washington's disfavor, however,

SUMMARY

Many Americans have blamed the resurgence of al-Qaeda and the Taliban on Pakistan's lackluster performance in the war on terror. Islamabad has indeed been ambivalent, but the convulsive political deterioration in the North West Frontier Province in Pakistan, Islamabad's military ineptitude in counterterrorism operations, and the political failures of the Karzai government in Afghanistan have all exacerbated the problem. Making U.S. aid conditional on Pakistan's performance in the war or undertaking unilateral strikes against terrorist targets in Pakistan would inflate suspicion of Washington's motives, and risk casting Pakistan, a nuclear-armed state, as an American adversary. U.S. policy must instead convince Pakistani elites that defeating terrorist groups serves their own interest, while emphasizing that a terrorist attack emanating from Pakistan would push Washington to adopt more painful tactics.



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Musharraf attacked al-Qaeda resolutely. Conversely, Musharraf approached the Taliban in a manner more akin to the Kashmiri terrorists and avoided targeting it directly; he especially overlooked its leadership. Drawing a distinction between “diehard militants,” who were deemed worthy of interdiction but often hard to find, and the “Taliban [who] are a part of Afghan society,” Musharraf urged the international community to begin instead a campaign of reconciliation focused on “winning [their] hearts and minds.”

Consistent with this dual approach, Musharraf moved major formations from the Army's XI Corps and the elite Special Services Group into the FATA in an effort to apprehend al-Qaeda elements. This insertion of the army into previously stateless areas sharply increased local disgruntlement, but it resulted over time in the arrest of some 700 al-Qaeda operatives, including key figures such as Khalid Sheikh Mohammed and Ramzi Binalshibh. More than 85,000 Pakistani troops remain engaged today in counterterrorism operations along the Afghan-Pakistan border. This campaign has disrupted al-Qaeda operations, but at a high price to the Pakistan Army. More than 600 soldiers have already sacrificed their lives, and a variety of groups sympathetic to al-Qaeda have sought to wreak revenge against the military regime, including Musharraf personally.

Pakistan's counterterrorism effort thus remains intense but unfortunately selective—with significant consequences for the overall success of the war on terror. The core members of the Taliban and al-Qaeda leadership have survived and remain active antagonists in the war against Afghanistan and the United States. Also surviving is the terrorist infrastructure supporting violence in Kashmir, which increasingly assists the Taliban and al-Qaeda in operations against Afghanistan, the United States, and even Pakistan itself. Musharraf's recent promulgation of emergency rule will only exacerbate this problem. If the emergency order lasts for any length of time, it will accelerate the political decay in Pakistan and

give radical Islamist forces within the country a new lease on life.

Explaining Pakistan's Counterterrorism Performance

What explains Islamabad's mixed performance in defeating terrorism? By all accounts, Musharraf himself is strongly committed to purging both al-Qaeda and the Taliban. He also remains personally opposed to the Taliban's political philosophy, repeatedly identifying the “talibanization” of Pakistan as a pressing security problem. But it is unclear whether this translates into a determination to eradicate the Taliban leadership, if not the cadres, entirely.

The Pakistani high command is similarly ambivalent. Although many want the Taliban to lose their effectiveness and fade away—which would make it unnecessary to turn their guns against their old clients—they worry about further inflaming Pashtun sensitivities, fearing diminished cooperation between the tribes in the FATA and the military.

Least enthusiastic about combating the Taliban are the lower-level ISID officers who managed the old relationship in the field. Some feel loyalty to their old clients; others exploit their leadership's ambivalence about the Taliban. Whatever the cause, they are reluctant to target the Taliban leadership in the manner required for the success of counterterrorism operations in the FATA.

These hesitations, together with the challenge of operating in an area that is increasingly opposed to the military's presence and is dominated by groups with strong ethnic or ideological links to the Taliban and al-Qaeda, exacerbate the three structural difficulties Pakistani leaders face.

First, new religious leaders, the *maulvis*, who view issues of political loyalty primarily through religious or ideological lenses, have supplanted the traditional authorities, the political agents and the tribal elders (*maliks*), in the FATA. These radicalized *maulvis*, viewing the protection of the Taliban and al-Qaeda

cadres as a politico-religious obligation, appear determined to deny the Pakistani state the information required to apprehend these targets. This permits al-Qaeda to safely “dissolve” into an environment that is hospitable to a larger number of Taliban adherents.

In addition, the Pakistani regime has suffered from the poor state of its technical intelligence, which is aggravated by al-Qaeda’s and the Taliban’s reliance on human couriers. Pakistan has begun arduously rebuilding its technical and human intelligence collection assets in the FATA. The latter are the most critical, but these take a long time to recruit and develop. What Pakistan needs more than ever is peace in the region if the army’s effort to develop and consolidate an effective human intelligence network, centered on resuscitating the traditional authorities, is to bear fruit. The \$750 million U.S. assistance program—if properly directed—could advance this goal of local stability, but neither Washington nor Islamabad should expect quick breakthroughs.

Second, the Pakistan Army’s intervention in the FATA has alienated the indigenous population, leading to social disruptions that have taken a significant toll on counterterrorism operations. The army is a professional force, but its units have often been stymied by their inability to secure the cooperation of the local populace—often a product of their own poor tactics. The infantry battalions that have been pressed into the FATA have been trained primarily for conventional warfare against India. Counterterrorism is not their forte, and, while they have done a remarkable job of learning by doing, they still betray a proclivity for tactical responses that are less than effective (and, perhaps, even counterproductive) when dealing with irregular forces. These include large-unit deployments, intense (and sometimes indiscriminate) employment of fire, and sledgehammer cordon and search tactics. The tribes have responded to these practices with violent attacks and seizures of Pakistani troops, which have led to declining military morale and increased soul-searching on the part of local

commanders. The antagonism caused by collateral damage from U.S. military strikes from the Afghan side of the FATA has further exacerbated these problems.

The most effective forces in such a situation potentially might have been the Frontier Corps and its local siblings, the Frontier Constabulary, the tribal police (*khassadars*), and the tribal militias (*lashkars*). They are often compromised, however, by their close ties with the now irate and often radicalized tribes. Riddled with Taliban sympathizers, inadequately motivated, and suspicious of both Islamabad’s and Washington’s intentions, they are also poorly trained and equipped for counterterrorism operations despite being capable—in theory—of securing the best intelligence.

Musharraf attempted to mitigate these problems by episodic “peace accords” with the pro-Taliban tribes in South and North Waziristan. In exchange for Pakistan Army withdrawal to its barracks and deference to tribal justice, the tribes were to prevent cross-border movements of terrorists into Afghanistan as well as attacks on Pakistani civilian and military targets, and were to eject foreigners, meaning al-Qaeda, from the FATA. But, despite some successes, the accords were doomed to failure because of the tribes’ determination to protect their Islamist cohorts against the Pakistani government and the United States, which were viewed as greater threats. Indeed, the accords provided a breathing space to recruit, train, and rearm the terrorists for a heightened campaign in Afghanistan. The failure of the FATA accords has thus left Musharraf in an unenviable limbo in which neither peace nor war seems able to deliver the counterterrorism goals pursued by the Pakistani state.

Third, the operational context surrounding the counterterrorism effort in the FATA has changed considerably since 2001. To begin with, the Taliban movement, which was never a tight and cohesive political entity, has become an even looser network of affiliated groups since being forced from power in Kabul. Today, the Taliban “alliance” (see box)

can be characterized as a disparate congeries of several elements united only by a common religious ideology, a desire to regain power in Afghanistan, and a deep antagonism toward the United States and its regional allies. The al-Qaeda network operates in this witches' brew: recognizing that an independent Pashtun in-

difficult. While some key members must be killed if the Taliban threat is to be erased, the fact remains that the counterterrorism campaign in Afghanistan will not be won until these insurgent forces are denied the political environment that allows them to survive and flourish.

The political failure of the Afghan government is most troublesome in this context. Despite advances in developing a constitutional regime in Kabul with strong international support, the Karzai administration has turned out to be conspicuously ineffective. As a *New York Times* report of September 25, 2007, summarized it: "Government corruption and poppy cultivation are rampant and public services remain a wreck; food prices are soaring, unemployment remains high and resurgent Taliban forces in the south are pressing toward th[e] capital."

Defeating the Taliban threat represents a classic chicken-and-egg dilemma: Taliban resurgence prevents the Karzai regime from effectively extending central control in the south and southeast, while the lack of effective state

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surgency that answers to no one but its own indigenous leadership stands the best chance of regaining control in Afghanistan and securing the continued support of the tribal elements in the FATA, al-Qaeda has eschewed the temptation to take over the Taliban, preferring instead to supply technology, training, and financial assistance to the extremist groups that request their services.

The diversity of these actors and the complexity of their relationships have thus made destroying the so-called Taliban much more

BOX 1 The Taliban Network

The Taliban network today consists of numerous, often self-directing, entities that include:

- The leadership centered around Mullah Omar and the directing *shuras* in Quetta and Peshawar;
- The dedicated Taliban cadres who survived the defeat in Afghanistan and who continue to draw on the *madaris* in the FATA for their continuing replenishment;
- The tribal networks of former mujahideen commanders such as Jalaluddin Haqqani, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, and Anwar-ul-Haq, who are united in their opposition to the Karzai regime but perhaps little else;
- The drug lords in eastern and southern Afghanistan who are either taxed or willingly contribute revenues that are important for the Taliban war against Kabul;
- The sundry former anti-Soviet commanders who control small groups of fighters and are engaged in criminal activities, often for hire;
- The disaffected Afghan Pashtun tribes, most conspicuously the rural Gilzai who, feeling disenfranchised in the current governing arrangements, continue to support the Taliban with manpower and sanctuary within Afghanistan; and
- Al-Qaeda, which collaborates with the Taliban coalition in order to assist the Taliban in recovering control of Kabul.

presence in these areas is precisely what has made the Taliban's return possible in the first place. And those outside forces that would allow Kabul to evade this dilemma are lacking: Pakistan is hobbled by political hesitancy and operational limitations; NATO forces are constrained by various "national caveats" that limit the effective employment of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF); and the principal U.S. and coalition forces engaged in combat operations against al-Qaeda and the Taliban are hobbled by ISAF constraints, limited numbers of troops, and NATO's unwillingness to deploy combat forces permanently in the eastern and southern provinces.

Thus, the failure to eliminate al-Qaeda and the Taliban in Afghanistan is owed to complex causes. Pakistan's reluctance has certainly played a role but is by no means the whole story. Pretending otherwise aids neither understanding nor policy.

What Can the United States Do?

Even in the George W. Bush administration, which has been Musharraf's strongest bastion of support, there is a growing belief that Pakistan must, as Under Secretary of State R. Nicholas Burns put it, "do even more" than it is currently. Blindly persisting with the present U.S. policy could set the stage for a convulsive dénouement in U.S.-Pakistani relations if any of the terrorist elements currently operating in the FATA manage to unleash a successful catastrophic attack on the United States. Yet Washington possesses no effective and radically different alternatives for prodding Islamabad to do more.

The administration has compromised its ability to secure stronger Pakistani cooperation by speaking in discordant voices, failing to maintain the proper balance between public praise and private pressure, and, until very recently, emphasizing inalterable political support for the person of Musharraf rather than for Musharraf as a means to accelerate the political transformation of Pakistan and secure victory in the war on terror. The politi-

cal crisis caused by Musharraf's "second coup" in Pakistan sharply demonstrates the limits of Washington's influence.

CONDITIONALITY

In 2007, the U.S. House of Representatives took the first tentative steps toward an alternative strategy of conditionality when it demanded that the administration certify that Pakistan was in fact "making all possible efforts to prevent the Taliban from operating in areas under its sovereign control" as the price

The United States has failed to secure Pakistani cooperation by speaking in discordant voices, failing to balance praise and pressure, and supporting Musharraf as a person rather than a means to transforming Pakistan and winning the war on terror.

for continued U.S. assistance. Others have proposed even stronger forms of conditionality, such as smart sanctions directed at the Pakistan Army, in an effort to make it more conscientious toward its counterterrorism obligations. But it is unlikely that these strategies will work today.

The Pakistani polity in general and the army and ISID in particular, despite benefiting greatly from the U.S. assistance received since 2001, are still deeply suspicious of long-term U.S. intentions in the region. Many in Pakistan's military feel that they are already paying disproportionately for what is in effect Washington's war and that they will be saddled with turmoil in the FATA and Afghanistan long after the United States has departed the region. This fear—based partly on the experience of episodic U.S. engagement in South Asia—already conditions Islamabad's reluctance to do battle more energetically against the Taliban.

Although enlightened Pakistani officers, including General Musharraf, recognize that defeating al-Qaeda and perhaps the Taliban is consistent with Pakistan's own self-interest, they also believe that the intensity of counter-

terrorism operations cannot be increased beyond what the domestic political traffic will bear. They worry that “a war of all against all” in the FATA would deepen the internal polarization of Pakistani society, embolden the radical fringe within Pakistan to mount even more violent acts of terror in response or in sympathy, and threaten both the security and the well-being of the still largely moderate Pakistani population.

The goal of American policy must be to convince Pakistan’s elites that the defeat of terrorism is in their own self-interest.

Any strategy of strong conditionality, even if carefully targeted at specific institutions such as the army and ISID, would therefore further intensify the resistance against effective counterterrorism operations and closer collaboration with the United States within these establishments.

UNILATERAL U.S. MILITARY ACTION

Another approach that has been articulated in recent months, especially by some Democratic presidential hopefuls, is one of unilateral U.S. military action against terrorist groups within Pakistan. None of those who advocate this strategy have explained how it would be integrated with the existing engagement with Pakistan. The current U.S. engagement is based on the fundamental premise that, for all its faults, the Pakistani government is basically a friend of the United States and that it must be helped in weaning itself from dalliances with terrorism while also assisted in protecting itself from its own extremist elements. If advocates of unilateral military action believe this premise is fallacious, they need to clarify why and how their preferred policy prescription would advance the goals of effectively eradicating the Taliban and al-Qaeda and assisting in transforming Pakistan into a successful state.

As it stands, any policy that threatens unilateral military action within Pakistan (and possibly against its forces) will deepen the already strong suspicion within the Pakistani military about U.S. regional goals and strengthen its resentment toward the United States. In such circumstances, it would not be surprising if the Pakistan Army and ISID became even more reluctant to apprehend terrorist cadres in the FATA. Threats of unilateral U.S. military action, therefore, have little to commend them, particularly because the president of the United States already possesses the capacity to exercise such options in an emergency.

Such an approach would also risk inflaming Pakistani public opinion, especially at the extremist fringes. In addition, it would embarrass moderate Pakistanis, both within civil society and in the armed services, who believe that cooperation with the United States represents the solution to both defeating terrorism and rejuvenating Pakistan.

DESIGNATING PAKISTAN AS AN ADVERSARY

If unilateral military action were to become the announced policy of the United States, such a policy would likely conclude eventually in the designation of Pakistan as an adversary of the United States. Whatever Islamabad’s failings may be, the prospect of having to treat a large and precariously poised Muslim state, armed with nuclear weapons and with an unsavory record of proliferation, as a mortal adversary should give pause to even the most jaded politician.

Some critics of current U.S. policy argue that stronger measures are clearly necessary because Pakistani officials are playing a double game: Convinced that the United States would not risk conflict with Pakistan, they are deliberately meeting their counterterrorism obligations halfheartedly. In so doing, they continue to collect U.S. aid in fighting the war on terror while they protect their terrorist clients.

The critics’ recommendations would be justified if the senior leadership in Pakistan was in fact pursuing such a strategy. Instead,

the evidence suggests that although some elements in Pakistani society (including in the army and ISID) would like to see the United States fail because of what is perceived to be its myriad transgressions against Muslims worldwide, the majority of senior Pakistani military officers support the operations aimed at defeating terrorism, even if their fears about its domestic repercussions and larger U.S. goals, coupled with their pursuit of narrow regional interests, prevent them from offering their cooperation more wholeheartedly.

If this is an accurate reading, then the goal of U.S. policy must be to convince these elites that the conclusive defeat of even their erstwhile clients is in their own enlightened self-interest. If interest does not move them sufficiently, then perhaps fear ought to. To that effect, U.S. policy makers should remind their Pakistani counterparts that Washington's attitudes toward Pakistan could change quickly—and in the direction of unremitting hostility—if a catastrophic terrorist attack on the United States was seen to have been made possible as a result of Pakistani negligence or connivance.

MODIFYING CURRENT POLICY

Admittedly, this is not entirely a satisfying solution because it still condemns U.S. policy to a variation of the status quo, but it is a variation that could make all the difference. While this administration, and perhaps even the next, will not enjoy the luxury of changing present U.S. policies toward Islamabad radically, it is worth introducing some modifications to the current approach. These modifications ought to include the following:

- Speak clearly and forcefully in private to Pakistani leaders about U.S. frustrations with their counterterrorism performance;
- Demand that in addition to interdicting border crossings and building fences, Islamabad start systematically targeting the Taliban leadership resident inside Pakistan;
- Assist Pakistan with the technology and training to monitor the critical border crossing

points and to prosecute small-unit counterterrorism operations more effectively;

- Allocate counterterrorism support funds to Pakistan for specific tasks linked to the performance of specific objectives rather than simply reimburse Islamabad for the bills presented;
- Support the Karzai government in Afghanistan to address challenges relating to security, economic development, and counter-narcotics by doubling the current levels of U.S. assistance over the long term; and
- Challenge NATO to live up to its collective security obligations by making a commitment to undertake combat operations and deploy its units in southern and eastern Afghanistan.

There is no assurance that Pakistani motivations and performance in the counterterrorism arena will be radically transformed if the Musharraf regime is replaced.

These improvements to the current policy are admittedly modest but they ought to help remind Islamabad that, if a major terrorist attack resulting from either Pakistani omissions or collusion were to occur, Washington would be pushed to adopt alternative strategies that although risky for the United States would be far more painful for Pakistan. The necessity for such a reminder is all the more urgent because even if the current regime is replaced, there is no assurance that Pakistani motivations and performance in the counterterrorism arena will be radically transformed. ■

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